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The Religious Views of Bjornson and Ibsen

ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT

CHRISTOPHER JARVON

CHRISTIANIA

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The Religious Views of Björnson and Ibsen

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KRISTOFER JANSON
CHRISTIANIA

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I have been asked to give a brief outline of the religious views of Björnson and Ibsen. This will not be so easy, as neither of them, to my knowledge, has expressed himself to any extent on the subject. We must resort to their works for information, and as the persons of the poetry do not always express the opinions of the author, but must speak out of their own character and views, which may perhaps be contrary to the opinions of the author, we must look at these expressions critically, and not tear them away from their connections.

I ought, however, to be better able to do this than most, as for a number of years I was the nearest neighbour of Björnson, and was daily together with him, and I have also had the pleasure of being personally acquainted with the other of our great poets named. Björnson was the son of a clergyman. His childhood in the parsonage of his parents, in one of the most charming and magnificent regions of Norway, and his personal love of father and mother, early aroused in his soul a feeling of reverence for things sacred. As a youth, commencing to think for himself, he was carried away by the Grundtvigian movement, which started in Denmark and extended to Norway.

The religious side of this movement was an opposition to the dry, soulless rationalism, that had taken possession of most of the pulpits of Denmark and Norway. The young minister Grundtvig gave expression to this opposition when he chose as a text for his probational sermon: "Why have the words of the Lord disappeared from his house?" The sermon aroused much attention. A bitter theological discussion followed between the friends of Grundtvig and his opponents, and Grundtvig suffered much from it, but triumphed so far at last, that he gathered a flock of the best youth of Denmark around his banner. Though orthodox in his dogmas, he had a leaning towards a more liberal faith. He criticised the idolatrous worship of the Scriptures. He denied the doctrine of total depravity. "The image of God in man has not been lost," he said, "else man would not have the capacity to receive the grace of God. The remnant of God's image in the soul is just the soil in which God can plant his

seed, and from which our salvation grows up." This belief gave his followers more hope, more joy, more faith in the divinity of man, and gave them a greater desire, than the rest of the orthodox party possessed, to work for the mental and moral elevation of the community.

The opponents of Grundtvig nicknamed his views of Christianity "the happy Christianity". His successor, Brandt, characterised his ideas thus: "Grundtvig's catechism may be written in three small paragraphs: 1. Spirit is power. 2. Spirit reveals itself only in the word. 3. Spirit works in freedom."

Grundtvig was very zealous for the continuation of the Lutheran reformation. Simultaneously with the religious revival there was an awakening of patriotic feeling. Grundtvig saw, that what the Common School could give, was too little to satisfy the needs of the masses. To ask of those, who would continue the work of their fathers as farmers, artisans and laborers, that they should attend the Latin School for six or seven years, was too much. "No, let us get schools for the common people," they said, "where they can hear lectures, that will arouse love in their hearts for the history and literature of their country, and will awaken their interest in the great questions of the day." In that manner Grundtvig became the father of the popular High Schools, which have had, and still continue to have, an immense influence on the youth of Denmark and Norway. In half-yearly winter courses the young boys and girls of the peasantry assemble at the High School, and through oral narration of the lives of remarkable men and women, who, so to say, have made the history of the world and of their native land, through lectures on the discoveries and inventions, that have lifted humanity in culture, through instruction in the proper use of their mother-tongue, through study of arithmetic, geography and the sciences, the minds of the pupils are developed and enlarged. One of the most inspiring means of arousing interest at these schools is the art of song. Both religious and patriotic songs resound in all the hours of the school and the recesses outside. Grundtvig himself wrote more than four hundred hymns, many of them marvellous gems. In the last years of Grundtvig's life his friends from all the three Scandinavian countries used to meet at Copenhagen on his birthday, to celebrate it with speeches, sermons and songs.

There were sometimes as many as three thousand persons present, among them several hundred clergymen. And when they blended their voices in singing the beautiful hymns, written by the venerable prophet and poet, the hall often shook with enthusiasm.

Such was the religious atmosphere, which Björnson was breathing throughout the years of his youth. He participated in the meetings of the Grundtvigians, had his best friends in their company, was often

on a visit to their popular High schools, both in Denmark and Norway, and delighted the scholars with his inspiring discourses. He wrote ardent patriotic songs, when the war was being waged with Germany for the sovereignty of Schleswig, and when the old prophet died in 1872, Björnson wrote two beautiful poems in memory of Grundtvig and brought the farewell and thanks from Norway to his grave.

In the year 1875 Björnson bought a farm in Gausdal in Norway. At that place was established a High school, in which I was a teacher. Thus it happened, that I became his nearest neighbour for seven years. At that time he began to study the works of the German and Dutch critics of the Bible, and it wrought a violent change in his religious beliefs. Here were arranged crushing truths, which nobody knew or paid attention to at home, though these works had been accessible for a number of years. Why did not the educated and religiously interested people spread this information broadcast over the land? No, they had kept away from the hungry the bread of life, for the purpose of holding them down in the old ignorance and power of priestcraft. Björnson was frothing with inward rage. He himself had been deceived, cheated — that was the word. How serious his mental struggle was, I often witnessed myself. Sometimes when I came to him, I found him pale from excitement. Like a caged lion, he walked the floor to and fro, shaking his mane. He tore his hair and doubled his fists, while perspiration gathered on his forehead. And then, as is frequently the case, he went to the opposite extreme. He suspected all the old theological doctrines to be mere priestly impositions, and he swallowed uncritically all information that removed the foundation from under the old gods. I was often compelled to rush into the fire to save, if I might, a shred of honour for ancient Abraham, Moses or David. I shall never forget his flaming speech about the immoral and insane dogma of eternal damnation.

Out of this struggle Björnson emerged as an agnostic. He put an interrogation point after every subject of discussion. "We cannot know anything about it. May be it is so; may be it is not. If there is a personal immortality beyond the grave, we must accept it, perhaps be thankful for it."

I am reminded of a funeral, where some of us, the friends of the poet, had spoken at the bier of the joy to be found in the thought of an eternal life, that should be a continuous labour in love, till perfection had been reached. On our return from the cemetery Björnson said: "I have never been able to understand your joy in the thought of an eternal life. As for me, I regard annihilation as the most desirable thing. When we have struggled and toiled through this life we ought to rest at last. The thought of continuation is painful to me."

In spite of his scepticism Björnson always preserved his respect for beliefs seriously entertained by others, even when such beliefs were fanatical in the extreme. He showed this best in the beautiful picture he has drawn of the "miracle-minister" Sang from Nordland, in his play, "Above Human Power."

By the dogmatists, however, he has been regarded as an iconoclast. In the preface to his play, "The King", he says: "When my opponents want to characterise my work in a few words they say: 'He attacks the throne and the altar.' I think I have served mental liberty. It is wholesome, once in a while, in the land of a state-church to remember what Christianity is. It is not an institution, still less a book, least of all a priestly robe or a house. **It is a life in God, according to the precepts and example of Jesus.** Maybe there are people, who imagine they attack Christianity, when they examine the history, origin or morality of a dogma. I don't think so. Honest investigation can only make it grow. Christianity, with or without its apparatus of dogmas, will, in what is the kernel of it, remain for thousands of years after us. There will always be spiritually-minded people, who through it will become nobler, some of them even great. I respect all of them. Among the Christians I have friends whom I love; never for a moment have I intended to attack their Christianity. I have no higher wish than to see them attempt, by its help, to change in full earnest some things in society."

Björnson settled down in his agnostic opinions. His doubt of a personal immortality and continuation of existence beyond the grave rather grew to denial than remained mere doubt. In the last utterance from him on this subject he says*, "If we could get so far on this earth that we knew it, then I might understand, that we would continue our life here or elsewhere to know more. If we ourselves always developed, then I might conceive, that there would be no room left for further development. We should have to be moved over into a new existence to be able to continue our growth. But the fact is, when we have reached the age of 50 or 60 — even before — we begin to grow downwards just as fast as we formerly grew upwards. If we live long enough, we end by becoming just as helpless and ignorant children as we were, when we commenced. What, then, should we continue our life for? What is there in us that is not of the earth? The soul is described as if it were something different from and more than the highest function of the body, as something for and by itself; but this view, so far as I know, is not supported by proofs. Some complain of the possibilities which are lost when a man dies, before he attains his full development — and

* A letter on immortality in "Samtiden", 1907.

this the fewest attain. Can we think, that we are born to a life so incomplete? Yes, this is in accord with what we are accustomed to see, namely, that the possibilities of billions are lost every year. Progress for us consists in creating better conditions, so that fewer possibilities will be lost. Let us do the good for the sake of the race and find our reward in its progress; let us suffer for the sake of mankind and believe, that suffering is a contribution to a better time for it. Do I not believe, then, that there is a God? you will probably inquire. Yes, I believe in something that is the order and harmony of all forces. But to how much confusion has it not led, that people form relations to that, which they do not know?"

Those, who through psychical research believe to have proved the immortality of the soul, Björnson treats with undeserved contempt. He speaks of spiritism as "a raging disease, a humbug." He admits, nevertheless, that "there is, no doubt, more around us, than we can see or know," and he says that "it is no longer defensible to dispose of these things as pure self-delusions." These utterances of Björnson are plain enough. He denies the existence of spirit separated from the body; he regards it only as "the highest function of the body," denies consequently an individual immortality in a world beyond the grave. All thinking, all labour must be done for the race, all suffering must be patiently borne, that the coming generation may obtain better conditions to live under.

This view comes out very strongly in his social drama "Above Human Power," where he lets the two children Credo and Spera, who represent the hopes of the future, express the opinion, that the inventions, which better the conditions of mankind, will solve the labour question. Credo says "What inventions there will be! What wealth! But father said that **that is nothing**, compared to what will come, when all human beings some day **move home again to earth.**" And Spera continues: "Heaven is here. In our hearts, you know, there is heaven." Credo replies: "In the future and in everything we do for it, is heaven."

Still the poet's aspiration sometimes breaks through the steel armour in which he has cramped his thought and his heart; as for instance, when with joy he pays homage to God, as not only "the order and harmony of all forces", but as a creative, life-giving and guiding personality:

"Source of sources, well of light,
Who dost kindle all the suns,
Thou, who sowest in all brains —
Thoughts are lighted and extinguished,
Worlds are opened and are closed
In the new thy light is flowing,
Thou, who wast and art and shalt be!"
(From the cantata: Light.)

And in the following hymn, vibrating with religious feeling, he tries to give utterance to the thoughts that assail him, when confronted with God everywhere in the world:

“Who art thou with the numerous names
From thousands of ages and tongues?
Thou wast refuge to us in our need,
Thou wast hope to the people oppressed,
Thou wast guest in the chamber of death,
Thou wast sunshine in gladness of life!
Still thy image we varyingly form,
And we call every view revelation,
And each person thinks his is the true one,
Till it bursts in a painful experience.
Oh, but be whom thou wilt,
For I know that thou art
As the eternal cry in my soul — it is Thou!
For justice and light,
For triumph of right,
In its power revealed — it is Thou! it is Thou!
All the laws which we see
Or conceive of, and those
Which we never shall dream of at all — it is Thou!
And their protecting care
Round my life they have laid,
And it sings in my heart — it is Thou! it is Thou’.”

Even the spirits, so deeply despised by him, find favor in his sight, when he exclaims in “The King”:

“The spirit-world’s society
Surrounds, like clouds, our life.”
“Rejoice, rejoice triumphal peals!
Crowds of spirits cleave the air,
And it glitters, as, in sunshine, snowlike shores.”

When the young king’s soul is carried home, the choir sings:

“Look around thee,
See the flock that did surround thee,
When the truth was in thy heart, was in thy deed.”

The genii are then surrounded by “the multitude of the heavenly host.”

The poet also lets the spirit of the deceased old king look down on his son and discover, how all the weeds he had planted in his heart

and mind are now grown up luxuriantly. From this we must conclude that the mind of the poet is inconsistent enough at times to break through his ironclad theories.

To determine the religious views of Ibsen is more difficult, because he never, to my knowledge, has expressed himself definitely on this subject. But in so far as the real religion of a man is, what he preaches in his daily life, and not what he professes in his creed, the great monuments, made by Ibsen in his mental workshop, his social dramas, must represent his religious confession. In these plays he unmercifully swings the lash over the world's widespread sins, hypocrisy, sophistry, immorality, indifference to woman's rights, worship of the right of the majority. Ibsen has at all times maintained the right of the individual in opposition to the opinions of the crowd, both in state and church. One must have perfect freedom to develop his individuality, but one must also be ready to take the consequences of his action. To be true to one's ideal, that is the challenge of Ibsen to the rising generation.

With a steady, but pitiless hand, like the surgeon cutting with his knife into the quivering flesh, he has exposed the sins of society, and has slashed at its lies in all forms. He has been an exhorter to repentance.

One of the poetical works of Ibsen, specially treating religious subjects, is "Brand". In that work, too, he intends to show how degrading and demoralizing it is to blot out, so to say, one's personal originality or individuality and make oneself a mere cog-wheel in the machinery of state or church. Through Brand the poet maintains the rights of the individual to think freely and act freely, according as his call commands him. But we should make a great mistake if we supposed, that Ibsen would present Brand, the man, as his religious ideal. Brand looms up above his soulless surroundings like a mighty tree in the forest; he preaches through his character and works self-sacrifice for others as the chief element in Christianity. But he succumbs in the fight, not as a suffering victim of the ignorance and prejudice of his day, but because he himself lacks perception of the many-sided nature of love, both in man and in God, and because he did not take into account, that the course of development is a slow advance, inch by inch, and cannot be forced to sudden leaps by commandments of might. To transform human wills to voluntarily choose and live the reform is not done in a day or two. Although Ibsen has not furnished us with any dogmatic confession, he was altogether too intelligent a man to be orthodox, and he has not, like Björnson, taken a position of denial in regard to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. In "The Masterbuilder Solness"

he takes hold of the occult questions. Solness has discovered, that he possesses the remarkable power, whose laws he does not comprehend, by an act of his will to create in the consciousness of others the notion that what he has only desired, in reality has happened. When he would explain this, he says: "It is not oneself alone, which does such great things. Oh, no, the helpers and servants, they must be with us, — they also, if it is to amount to anything. But they never come of themselves. One must call them perseveringly. As it were, inwardly, you know. For it is the 'troll' in one, you see, — — it is that which calls to the powers outside us. And then you must give in — whether you will or no."

We are reminded by this of the words in the Epistle to the Ephesians: "For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of the world, against spiritual wickedness in the heavenly places."

But was it necessary, that Ibsen should have any personal connection with these utterances of the masterbuilder Solness? Is not Solness considered half-mad? Yes, I am convinced that the occult phenomena, the co-operation both for good and for evil between the world here in the flesh and the invisible powers above — "the good devils and bad devils, light haired devils and dark haired devils" as Solness expresses it — very much occupied the imagination of Ibsen. For when, some years ago, I gave some lectures at Christiania on Spiritualism and the doctrine of reincarnation, Ibsen was present, and after the lectures he stepped up to the platform, in full view of the audience, and took my hand and thanked me. Of this, at least, we may be sure: Nothing agitating the minds of his contemporaries, nothing of vital importance in the development of humanity remained distant to the searching and penetrating intellect of Henrik Ibsen.

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Von Karl König. 154 Seiten. Mark 2,—.

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Richard Wettbrecht (in der „Deutschen Welt“ der „Deutschen Zeitung“).

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Von Ferdinand Gerstung. 100 Seiten. Mark 2,—.

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Von K. Neumärker. 176 Seiten. Mark 2,—.

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Bd. 4 Jesus, wer er geschichtlich war.

Von Dr. Arno Neumann. 206 Seiten. Mark 3,20.

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Prof. Baumgarten (in der Monatsschrift für kirchliche Praxis).

Bd. 5 Jesus, was er uns heute ist. Von Alfred König.

128 Seiten, brosch. Mark 1,60, geb. Mark 2,—.

Wer da weiß, wie sehr unser herkömmlicher Religionsunterricht unter dem inneren Konflikt leidet, der für die Lehrer entstehen muß, die innerlich dem orthodoxen Dogma entfremdet sind und der herkömmlichen offiziellen kirchlich und staatlich korrekten Christologie nicht zustimmen können, der wird Schriften, wie die vorliegende, mit aufrichtiger Freude begrüßen. Nur auf diesem Wege ist Genesung für unsere evangelische Kirche und für den Religionsunterricht unserer Jugend zu erhoffen: durch die dogmatischen Hüllen hindurch zum lebendigen Jesus der Evangelien, der den kostbaren Schatz seines Lebens in irdischen, ja man könnte trotz Chamberlain sagen, in jüdischen Gefäßen getragen! Für den christologisch Korrekten wird das Buch ein Aergernis sein; um so mehr allen willkommen, die in den Wirrnissen der Gegenwart neue Pfade zum alten Gott mit Hilfe des Menschen Jesu suchen.

Prof. Rein (in der Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Pädagogik).

Bd. 6 Die Religion des Geistes, wie der Gebildete denkend zu ihr Stellung nimmt. Von Dietrich Graue-Berlin.

144 Seiten, brosch. Mark 1,60, geb. Mark 2,—.

. . . Wie kaum ein anderer in unserer Zeit hat Graue es verstanden, vom Standpunkt der modernen Gebildeten aus die Religion zu betrachten und ihnen für ihre Bedeutung in der Geisteswelt die Augen zu öffnen. Es gibt wohl niemand, der bei einigem religiösen Gefühlsich der Kraft der hier entwickelten Gedanken entziehen könnte. . . .

Protestantenblatt.

Bd. 7 Du sollst, Grundzüge einer sittlichen Weltanschauung.
Von Prof. Leonhard Ragaz. 2. Auflage 181 Seiten. Mark 2,40.

3. Auflage in Vorbereitung!

Es ist der deutsche Idealismus überhaupt . . . , in dem des Verfassers Stellung begründet ist, Kant, Fichte, Schiller und der mit Carlyles Augen betrachtete Goethe. Aber das Buch ist mehr als das. Ragaz prüft die aus der Not und der Sehnsucht unserer Zeit sich herausdrängenden Gedankenmächte, Naturalismus, Positivismus, Sozialismus, Individualismus, Comte, Tolstoi, Nietzsche, dem er auch eine positive Bedeutung abzugewinnen vermag, und erkennt in all dem Ringen eine Sehnsucht nach einer neuen Liebe, einer neuen Reinheit, einem neuen Glauben, eine Sehnsucht nach dem Heiligen, das er im sittlichen Bewußtsein findet. Es ist in seinen Höhepunkten ebenso Glaube und Offenbarung wie die Religion und findet nur in ihr den Zusammenhang mit der Gesamtwirklichkeit.

Adolf Keller (in der „Christlichen Welt“).

Bd. 8 Beten und moderner Mensch sein, wie sich das beides zusammenreimt. Von Günther Wohlfarth. 176 Seiten. M. 2,—.

. . . Daß sich beides reimt, daß der moderne Mensch, dessen gewaltigste Kraftquelle nicht Natur, sondern Geist ist, beten, d. h. eigentlich Geist trinken muß, wird in außerordentlich gewandter Darstellung gezeigt. Es ist keine nüchterne theoretische Auseinandersetzung, auch kein Reden in theologischen Begriffen, es sind Bilder, Stimmungen, Lebenserfahrungen, die mit der packenden Frische persönlichen Empfindens niedergeschrieben sind. Das ganze Buch ist wie der Jubelgesang einer Seele, die dem göttlichen Geist sich geöffnet hat, und macht darum auch unsere Seele frei zum Aufflug . . .

Bd. 9 Persönliches Christentum, das Eine, was uns not tut.
Von Dr. Otto Hering. 96 Seiten, brosch. M. 1,60, geb. M. 2,—.

. . . Ein würdiger und schöner Abschluß des verdienstvollen Werkes, wahrhaft fromm und frei. Den vielen, die unter freigesinnten Theologen Leute verstehen, die pietätlos niederreißen wollen, was die Frömmigkeit früherer Jahrhunderte andachtsvoll aufgebaut hat, möchten wir Herings tieffrommes und ergreifendes Zeugnis von dem persönlichen Christentum, als dem Einen, das not ist, zum Studium empfehlen; sie würden, wenn anders sie nicht ganz fanatisiert sind, ein besseres und zutreffenderes Bild vom freigesinnten Theologen bekommen.

Neue Folge Bd. 10 Das Opfer, das Grundgesetz der Welt.
Von Ferdinand Gerstung. Brosch. Mark 1,—.

Der Verfasser hat sich die Aufgabe gestellt, zu zeigen, daß die Gesetze, welche die Welt im Innersten zusammenhalten, verwandt, ja vielleicht sogar gleichartig sind mit den Gesetzen, welche die sittliche Weltordnung beherrschen, so daß Natur- und Geisteswelt keine Gegensätze, sondern nach ihrem innersten Kern und Wesen aufeinander hin geschaffen sind. Aus einer Urquelle strömt Natur- und Geistesleben; das weltbeherrschende Opfergesetz aber ist das Mittel, durch welches beide ihrer hohen Bestimmung entgegengeführt werden. Das Büchlein sucht die Brücke zu schlagen zwischen idealistischem Monismus und christlicher Weltanschauung.

Urteil über die ganze Schriftenreihe „Neue Pfade zum alten Gott“.

Diese Schriften sind wohl geeignet, unserer Zeit einen ähnlichen Dienst zu erweisen, wie vor hundert Jahren Schleiermachers „Reden über die Religion, an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern“.

Staatsanzeiger für Württemberg.

== Als Vorläufer zu obiger Sammlung ist erschienen: ==

Im Kampf um Gott und um das eigene Ich.

Ernsthafte Plaudereien von Karl König.

2. Auflage. 133 Seiten. Geb. Mark 1,50.

Die „Tägliche Rundschau“ schreibt zum Schlusse einer eingehenden Anzeige: „Ich habe seit Jahren kein Buch gelesen, das so mit der Gewandtheit modernen Stils und doch ohne jegliche Borniertheit die schwersten Lebensprobleme zu erörtern weiß, und auch seit Jahren kein Buch, das so vorzüglich sagt, was Persönlichkeitsreligion ist.“

Die Schriftenreihe hat in ihrer Gesamtheit, wie bzgl. der einzelnen Werke, allseitig begeisterte Anerkennung und wärmste Empfehlung gefunden; von einigen Bänden sind neue Auflagen in Vorbereitung. Professor L. Ragaz: Du sollst — Grundzüge einer sittlichen Weltanschauung, erscheint soeben in III. Auflage. Arno Neumanns — Jesus, wer er geschichtlich war, ist ins Englische übersetzt worden und hat in England und Amerika weite Verbreitung gefunden. Eine japanische Uebersetzung ist in Vorbereitung. Es besteht die Absicht, die Schriftenreihe nunmehr weiter fortzuführen und auszubauen. Von dem fromm-freien Standpunkt der „Neuen Pfade zum alten Gott“ soll Stellung genommen werden zu allen brennenden Zeitfragen.

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